

AUGUSTINE v PELAGIUS ON ORIGINAL SIN

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The controversy that arose in the early 5th century between Augustine, bishop of Hippo, and Pelagius, the British monk, was destined to have far-reaching consequences. It determined, to a large extent, the development of Western theology concerning sin, grace and salvation right up to the Reformation. It was revived in the dispute between Erasmus and Luther and it shaped the conflict that arose in Holland in the closing years of the 16th century, centring on Arminius. For four hundred years it has divided evangelical Protestantism into the familiar Arminian and Calvinistic camps, although it is very important to note that Arminius was not a Pelagian. Defenders and detractors of both Augustine and Pelagius have not been wanting, and both names have come to represent systems that either epitomise the totality of truth or edifices of unsupportable error. For some the adjective 'Augustinian' is tantamount to a Manichean pessimism of human nature coupled with predestination and life-long bondage to Adamic sin, while for others 'Pelagian' means an irresponsible optimism about human nature that virtually excludes the need of Christ or divine grace and makes every man his own saviour. Our concern in this investigation is not with the whole range of the Augustinian/Pelagian debate but more specifically with the doctrine of original sin.

While the controversy with Pelagius and his followers engaged Augustine from about 411 until his death nineteen years later, and while his most important anti-Pelagian writings appeared between 415 and 420, the earlier works must be noted. In 395/6 Augustine wrote two works on Paul's letter to the Romans, *Expositions of 84 Propositions Concerning the Epistle to the Romans*, and *Unfinished Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*. In both these works the doctrines of grace are clearly outlined. Christ has made atonement for the sins of the world and sinners are saved by grace through faith. As would be expected Augustine expounds the connection between Adam and universal sin and between Christ and the grace of salvation. He wrote: 'By the condemnation of one transgression Adam caused the death of many, but by the gift for many sins, our Lord Jesus Christ has given grace for life eternal...This, then, is the distinction: in Adam one sin was condemned, but by the Lord many sins were forgiven'.¹ What is surprising here is how lightly Augustine deals with the Adam/Christ antithesis, and what is particularly surprising, is that he says nothing at all about Romans 5:12. In a few years this one verse will become a dominating

¹ Augustine, *Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans*, trans P F Landes, (Chico, Calif: Scholars Press, 1982), 11.

concern for Augustine and in subsequent writings there are at least one hundred and fifty passages where he attempts an exegesis of Paul's words. It is certainly surprising that although he gives attention to eighty-four important propositions from Romans, and attempts a fuller exposition of the whole letter, he makes no mention at all of how the whole race is affected by the transmission of Adamic guilt and corruption, doctrines that are foundational for his whole understanding of salvation.

The third work that must be briefly noted is his 396/97 treatise entitled, *Responses to Various Questions from Simplicianus*. Here he wrote:

From Adam has sprung one mass of sinners and godless men, in which both Jews and Gentiles belong to one lump, apart from the grace of God. If the potter out of one lump of clay makes one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour, it is manifest that God has made of the Jews some vessels unto honour and others unto dishonour, and similarly of the Gentiles. It follows that all must be understood to belong to one lump.²

Here, for the first time, Augustine employs the word *massa*, the mass or lump, meaning the totality of fallen humanity. From this mass, guilty before God and utterly corrupt, God, in mercy, chooses his elect and brings them to final salvation. This exposition, based on Romans 9:21, and written in reply to a question from Simplicianus, shows clearly that Augustine's understanding of sin, grace and predestination was taking shape many years before the Pelagian conflict began. This means that the course of the ensuing controversy with Pelagius and his followers was determined, on Augustine's side, not by his discovery of new doctrines of inherited sin and guilt, but rather how he perceived the dangerous teaching emanating from his opponents. The only antidote against their novel and dangerously defective portrayal of the way of salvation was, Augustine believed, a thorough, trenchant, consistent, unequivocal and repeated hammering home of Romans 5:12 'By one man sin entered into the world...' In view of that, the best methodology in examining Augustine's doctrine of original sin is to compare what he wrote on this subject in the course of the controversy.

Although dates for Pelagius' life are uncertain, he was at Rome around AD 400 and wrote and published there his *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul*.³ It is difficult to gauge how many disciples he attracted but one of these was a young lawyer, Coelestius. To escape the sack of Rome, both teacher and pupil emigrated to Carthage and when Pelagius went on to Palestine, Coelestius remained in Carthage and sought ordination as a presbyter. As a result of a questioning of his views he was accused of heresy and appeared before a synod presided over by

² 'Responses to Various Questions from Simplicianus', trans J H S Burleigh, *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol 6 (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1953), 402.

³ There is a recent and very able summary of Pelagius' life and work in B R Rees, *Pelagius: Life and Letters* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1998).

Bishop Aurelius. He was charged on seven points and the documentation of these is one of the earliest outlines of what was emerging as Pelagian teaching:

1. Adam was created mortal and would have died even if he had not sinned.
2. Adam's sin affected only himself and was not passed to his descendants in any sense.
3. Infants are born in the same state as Adam was before he sinned.
4. The whole race does not die because of Adam's sin.
5. Unbaptised infants have eternal life.
6. The law leads to heaven just as the gospel does.
7. Even under the old covenant some men lived without sin.⁴

As Coelestius was unwilling to disown these sentiments, he was found guilty of heresy and excommunicated.

Around 411/12 a tribune at Carthage, Flavius Marcellinus, wrote to Augustine with questions on which he needed help. Although Coelestius had been condemned at Carthage, the theological dispute still continued and Marcellinus's questions were on the connection between sin and death, how sin is transmitted, do infants need salvation, and whether or not it is possible for Christians to live without sin. Augustine's reply was entitled, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sin and On the Baptism of Infants*, and it ran to three Books. In the first Book, he supported his doctrine of original sin with three main arguments:

1. Death reigns in the whole world without exception
2. Paul teaches the doctrine of original sin in Romans 5:12-21.
3. Original sin is presupposed by the Church's universal custom of baptising infants.

If the positions defended by Coelestius can be described as 'Pelagian', (though Pelagius may not have subscribed to every point argued by Coelestius), then the term 'Pelagianism' can be applied to the doctrines that Augustine sets out to refute.

The physical death to which the whole race is sentenced is not the result of nature, rather God warned Adam: 'In the day you eat you will die', and Augustine does not understand how anyone can deny this expressed link between sin and the universal judgement of death. Is it not plainly taught in biblical passages like Romans 8:10,11, and 1 Corinthians 15:21? Now Augustine comes to the heart of the controversy: how did Adam's sin affect the whole race? The Pelagians admitted there was a consequence but only to the extent that Adam was

⁴ 'On The Proceedings of Pelagius', *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Vol 5*, ed. P Schaff, (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1972), 193.

a bad example and all his progeny imitate that bad example. Romans 5:12, says Augustine, gives a sufficient answer to this theory. Paul is explicit: 'By one man sin entered into the world'. If Paul had wanted to say that sin entered, not by 'natural descent but by imitation', he would have named the offender as the devil, not Adam. Paul's words can only mean one thing, sin entered the human race by propagation from Adam, not by mere imitation. For Augustine the *locus classicus* of Paul's teaching was the phrase *eph ho pantes hemarton*, meaning 'inasmuch' or 'because all sinned'. While the Pelagians interpreted that to mean that all men sinned by imitating Adam's disobedience, Augustine saw it very differently.

In the clause which follows, 'And in this [sin] all have sinned', how cautiously and unambiguously is the statement expressed. For if you understand that sin to be meant which by one man entered into the world, and in which all have sinned, it is surely clear enough that the sins which are peculiar to every man, which they themselves commit and which belong simply to them, mean one thing; and that the one sin, in any by which all have sinned, means another thing, since all were included in that one man.⁵

Although Augustine makes no mention of any variant readings in the text of Romans 5:12, it is clear that he is following a Latin text in which Paul's *eph ho*, meaning 'inasmuch' or 'because' has become, in Latin, *in quo*, 'in whom', thus giving the sense that all sinned in Adam's sin. In the many passages where Augustine returns time after time to this text, implicitly or explicitly this is the exegesis he proposes. He makes no concession that while Paul says sin entered the world he does not say *how* this came about. Augustine takes it as read that he meant by propagation from Adam, and the only alternative to this interpretation is the superficial idea of imitation advocated by the Pelagians.

The main thrust, however, of Augustine's argument was not on either of the points just outlined, viz. universal death as a penalty for Adam's transgression and Adam's sin transmitted by propagation; it was rather the argument based on infant baptism. The universal Church, he asserted, has always baptised infants and that is an undeniable proof of original sin. It is absurd to say, as the Pelagians allege, that infants are baptised for the sins they have personally committed since birth. It is no more convincing to say they committed sin in some previous existence. So why are they baptised? The answer is very clear. Christ came into the world to save sinners. Christian baptism is a baptism for the remission of sins and all who undergo that baptism are sinners. The only explanation is that the Church has always believed that infants share in original sin and by baptism are saved from its consequences.

⁵ 'The Anti-Pelagian Works', *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Vol 1*, ed. Marcus Dods, (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1872), 12,13.

It is important to note that Augustine switches the argument from an attempted exposition of biblical passages to a theological argument based on what he calls the Church's universal practice. What surprises the reader who follows Augustine in all his writings that deal with sin and grace is the place he gives to the doctrine of infant baptism. While his fixed understanding of Romans 5:12, teaching sin transmitted by genetic propagation, is referred to approximately one hundred and fifty times in these writings, his arguments on the theology of infant baptism take up much more space and are far more dominating than his exegesis of the Roman text.

He pursues the point in *The Merits*. For whom did Christ die? Scripture says he died for the ungodly. But if the Pelagian argument is true, and infants have no original sin, then Christ did not die for them, for he died only for the ungodly. As this argument cannot be refuted, then Christ died for infants who had not sinned personally but who were sinners because they inherited original sin. Augustine knows that this assertion will be challenged by the obvious question—what happens to infants who die unbaptised—and the Bishop does not shrink from the logical answer. 'It may therefore be correctly affirmed that such infants as quit the body without being baptised, will be involved in condemnation, but of the mildest character'.⁶ Augustine does not explain his phrase, 'of the mildest character', but ten pages later he appeals to God's hidden wisdom. If we ask, is it not unjust that 'infants who depart this life without baptism should be deprived not only of the kingdom of God, but also of eternal life and salvation', the answer is that God's judgements are inscrutable.⁷ It never occurred, apparently, to Augustine, that perhaps there was a very good reason to question this theology of infant baptism. Instead the implications of this practice become the buttress for his doctrine of propagated sinfulness.

In Book Two Augustine raises and answers four questions that relate directly to the Pelagian controversy. While the first three deal with arguments for and against the possibilities of sinlessness in this life, the fourth topic is the doctrine of original sin. The fall of Adam was nothing less than a cataclysmic event (Augustine always read Genesis 1-3 literally, unlike his mentor, Bishop Ambrose, who read it allegorically), and while the whole creation has suffered as a consequence, Adam's sin has powerfully affected the entire human race. All his descendants inherit the immediate effects of his sin, namely mortality and corruption, but, much more significantly, they also inherit Adam's sin and guilt because there is a seminal relationship between the first Head and all who sprang from him. From the discussion here in Book Two and the other passages, in later writings, where he treats original sin, Augustine advances two distinctive characteristics of universal human sinfulness.

⁶ *Anti-Pelagian Works*, Vol 1, 21.

⁷ *Ibid*, 30.

First, original sin is a *vitium*, a kind of hereditary moral disability. In his unfallen state, Adam was perfect and had unrestricted freedom of will. But after the Fall, that liberty was limited; fallen man is free only to choose disobedience, rebellion and all other manifestations of sin—but he is not able either to choose any good of himself or even to believe in Christ, without the help of divine grace. Time and time again Augustine comes back to what he sees as the Pelagians' gross misunderstanding of fallen humanity. No matter what they claim about the necessity for Christ's grace, or the priority of the divine initiative in man's salvation, underlying their whole system is the presumption that men and women can choose to eschew evil and perform the good. This error arises mainly, Augustine thinks, because the Pelagians deny the hereditary proneness to evil that is propagated from Adam to all his descendants.

While it is not strictly accurate to speak of an 'earlier' and a 'later' Augustine in terms of the development of his theological thought, it is true that as he pursued the controversy with the Pelagians he modified some of his earlier positions. This is particularly noticeable when his doctrines of grace and free will are examined. Indeed Augustine admits as much in his *Retractationes*, when he reconsidered the first treatise he had written, *De Libero Arbitrio*. His interest then had been to investigate how evil first arises in the human will. Now the challenge of the Pelagians is forcing him to ask how God's grace operates in fallen man. They are asserting that if we sin by an exercise of our will, then we can just as surely choose to turn away from sin and do good instead. But Augustine is sure that this is contrary to human experience; no man is able to turn away from sin unless God's assists him by grace. Does this mean, then, that fallen man has no freedom of will at all? In his, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, which concentrates on the absolute necessity of divine grace in man's salvation and the Christian life, he concludes with a very well-argued understanding of the relationship between God's grace, our free will and the faith by which we are saved. How do these co-exist, as it were, in fallen man, without contradiction and confusion? We are saved by believing in Christ and believing is an act of the will, and it must be our act, yet it is only as grace operates on our will that we are capable of any volitional good act. As grace leads us to believe and enables us to believe, so the Christian is directed to every good thing that Christ has prepared for him. In this delineation of grace, Augustine makes a sharp distinction between the faculty of free will, which fallen mankind retains, and the use of free will. There is a further distinction made between ability and volition. When the sinner believes in Christ, that is an act of the will, but the sinner will only thus believe when he is given power to believe, and that power is always outside himself and from above.⁸

This subject is taken up more fully later in his 420 work, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*. When Adam sinned he did not totally lose freedom of choice but

⁸ *Ibid.*, 211-224.

he certainly lost that freedom that would enable him to be fully righteous. Fallen mankind retains free will because no one is forced into sin; however, all men and women have given themselves to sin by their free choice and in this surrender of the will to evil they are carried into more and more sin. It is not the devil who forces the sinner to sin; rather each fallen man is the source of his own wickedness. So it is not true that the sinner has no freedom of will; it is rather that he remains free only to commit sin. Augustine will not admit that this is tantamount to saying that sinners have no free will. Yes, their freedom is both vitiated and limited but it is, nevertheless, a freedom. Unaided it can will to do evil but it needs divine grace to will to reject evil and do good.

There is much evidence in Augustine's writings for his understanding of original sin as *vitium*. But that is only half the truth, for original sin must also be considered as *reatus*, an inherited legal liability. Adam's sin placed him under condemnation and that sentence of condemnation is transmitted to the race. It is in this discussion that Augustine defines his understanding of concupiscence, a term that will appear constantly in all his later writings on sin and grace. Augustine sees concupiscence, in the language of Romans 7, as the law of sin which works in the body of this death. For all who are baptised into Christ, the guilt of sin is taken away but concupiscence remains. But Augustine is not content to leave it there, because he sees concupiscence as the fundamental characteristic of fallen man. Concupiscence is the means by which original sin is transmitted from Adam to his posterity and from one generation to another. Concupiscence is the fundamental motivation for sexual union and the propagation of the species. 'He only was born without sin whom his virgin mother conceived without the embrace of a husband, not by the concupiscence of the flesh but by the chaste submission of her mind'.⁹ Again and again in his controversy with the Pelagians, Augustine fell back on the Church's practice of infant baptism. There concupiscence, as guilt, is done away, but 'in unbaptised infants it binds them as guilty and as children of wrath', and if they die in infancy it involves them in condemnation.¹⁰

About the time he was writing to Marcellinus, Augustine read Pelagius' *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*. There he found arguments which, he observed, he did not believe were held by anyone. In reply he wrote a long letter to Marcellinus and took up Pelagius' points. Three of these were particularly important. First, Pelagius reasoned, if Adam's sin affected those who do not sin (a theoretical possibility that Pelagius admitted but denied that any witnesses to it could be found), then Christ's atonement for sin must likewise affect those who do not believe. Secondly, if sin is passed from generation to generation by hereditary propagation, and no one can transmit what he does not have, then how can the children of baptised parents inherit sin from them? Thirdly, if God remits

⁹ *Ibid*, 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 74.

our sins so that we are no longer guilty of them, how can he possibly, in justice, impute someone else's sins to us? If the soul is created by God, then surely he cannot impute alien sin to it?

In his reply Augustine contented himself by making two assertions. First, if it is admitted that there are some things in Scripture that are ambiguous, there is no ambiguity about the way of salvation. Christ came to call sinners to repentance and there is no eternal life except for those who are born of the Spirit into Christ's kingdom. Secondly, the Church has always baptised infants. This is a fixed doctrine in the Church and it should be used as a means to reach the truth in other areas of belief. This hermenutical admission by Augustine, as we might term it, is very important when assessing his teaching. While the doctrines of Adam's headship, universal sinfulness and salvation by grace are all very prominent in his writings, it is his doctrine of the necessity and practice of infant baptism that can be described as foundational for his whole theological system. When he has said all he can say about the proof of original sin found in certain biblical passages, especially Romans 5:12, he comes back at his detractors and says: The Church universally insists on infant baptism and that is all the proof we need of inherited sinfulness. If we question infant baptism we question the whole work of Christ and the very nature of salvation itself.

In about 414 Augustine read another work by Pelagius, now lost, *Liber de natura*, and answered it with, *On Nature and Grace*. He has no doubt that Pelagius attributes far too much good to human nature, going as far as to say that there is always the possibility for human beings to live without sin and therefore without condemnation. If Pelagius is right then we must conclude that Christ died in vain, for if any man, by his own determination and volition can live a life without sin, then it is possible that all men can achieve this. Pelagius is building a heretical edifice on a heretical foundation. He is asserting that because sin is not a substance it cannot, therefore, affect human nature which is a substance. Augustine's answer is abrupt. Pelagius' contention destroys the work of the Saviour, for how can he be said to be a Saviour from sin if sins do not corrupt? Pelagius will not admit that Scripture speaks of all men and women coming into the world spiritually dead, and Augustine is close to exasperation in his reply.

Those who are forsaken by the light of righteousness, and are therefore groping in darkness, produce nothing else than works of darkness...The truth, then, designates as *dead* those whom this man declares to have been unable to be damaged or corrupted by sin, on the ground, forsooth, that he has discovered sin to be no substance! Nobody tells him that 'man was so formed as to be able to pass from righteousness to sin, and yet not able to return from sin to righteousness'. But that free will, whereby man corrupted his own self, was sufficient for his passing into sin; but to return to righteousness, he has need of a Physician, since he is out of health; he has

need of a Vivifier because he is dead.¹¹

Following the meeting of the African Council in Carthage, in May 418, which condemned Pelagianism, and which Augustine attended, he composed two more works on the Pelagian conflict; *On the Grace of Christ*, and, *On Original Sin*. In the former he claims that he has read what both Coelestius and Pelagius have written about grace—and he is convinced that they do not really understand what true grace is.

As for that grace indeed by which we are justified—in other words whereby ‘the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts’, I have nowhere in those writings of Pelagius and Coelestius which I have had the opportunity of reading, found them acknowledging it as it ought to be acknowledged...For that which God promises we do not ourselves bring about by our own choice or natural power, but He himself effects it by grace.¹²

Although Augustine’s second work written at Carthage was entitled, *On Original Sin*, it did not add materially to what he had already written on the subject, especially regarding the nature and transmission of original sin. Augustine is much more concerned to combat the dangerous tendencies he believes he sees in the Pelagian system. However the Pelagians try to explain why the Church baptises infants, they cannot hide their basic premise—their denial that original sin affects infants. The Synod of Carthage had clearly shown where Coelestius stood on this question, and while Pelagius appears more cautious than his younger colleague, it was his deception that misled the Council of Diospolis.¹³ Augustine evidently had before him a work by Pelagius now lost, entitled *Defence of Free Will*, and he quoted from it

Nothing good, and nothing evil, on account of which we are deemed either laudable or blameworthy, is born with us but is done by us; for we are born not fully developed, but with a capacity for either conduct; we are formed naturally without either virtue or vice; and previous to the action of our own proper will, the only thing in him is what God has formed in him.¹⁴

Augustine concluded the work by answering the counter-claims of the Pelagians that his doctrine of propagated sin makes marriage an evil contract. Augustine objects to this, answering that marriage was ordained by God and is therefore good, for three reasons. It is the ordained means of procreation, it is the guarantee of chastity and it is the *connubii sacramentum* (‘bond of union’). While marriage was intended by God to be good for mankind, in fallen man it is still good, but it

¹¹ *Anti-Pelagian Works, Vol 1, 255.*

¹² *Anti-Pelagian Works, Vol 2, 29.*

¹³ Details of the proceedings of this council held at Diospolis (Lydda) in 415 are in G Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1986), 335-338; also B R Rees, *Pelagius: Life and Letters*, 135-139.

¹⁴ *Anti-Pelagian Works, Vo. 2, 58.*

is a defective good. What is born from it is indeed a good nature, created by God, but this good nature is now in a fallen condition. While the purpose of marriage is good and when ‘reason applies the concupiscence to a good end’, it is not overcome by evil. The Pelagians objected to the Catholic doctrine of original sin in infants by saying there was no difference between the infants born of unregenerate parents and those born of baptised parents. Augustine spelt out his answer to this once more.

The fault of our nature remains in our offspring so deeply impressed as to make it guilty, even when the guilt of the self-same fault has been washed away in the parent by the remission of sins—until every defect which ends in sin by the consent of the human will is consumed and done away in the last regeneration. This will be identical with that renovation of the very flesh itself which is promised in its future resurrection...The same regeneration which now renews our spirit, so that all our past sins are remitted, will by and by also operate to the renewal to eternal life of that very flesh, by the resurrection of which to an incorruptible state the incentive of all sins will be purged out of our nature.¹⁵

While it was the Pelagian controversy that occasioned most of Augustine’s writings on original sin, his 421 handbook of doctrine, the *Enchiridion*, also spelled out how fundamentally he viewed this teaching. In it he defined original sin.

From this state [paradise] after he had sinned, man was banished, and through his sin he subjected his descendants to the punishment of sin and damnation, for he had radically corrupted them, in himself, by his sinning. As a consequence of this, all those descended from him...entered into the inheritance of original sin. Through this involvement they were led...to that final state of punishment without end. ‘Thus by one man sin entered into the world and death through sin; and thus death came upon all men, since all men have sinned.’¹⁶

Augustine’s writings on the Pelagian controversy had occupied him for many years and had led him to write some of his most important works on sin and grace. Just as he thought the controversy was coming to an end, he received excerpts from a book written against him by Julian of Eclanum. He proved to be the most consistent exponent of Pelagian views and the most able opponent that Augustine had to contend with. Julian alleged that Augustine’s doctrine of inherited sinfulness was just an expression of the Manichean heresy from which the bishop had never fully divorced himself. Further, when Augustine set out to magnify divine grace it was only a subterfuge by which he sought to defend a doctrine that made God partial in his judgements—and that partiality was seen at

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 86.

¹⁶ ‘Enchiridion’, *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 7, trans A C Outler, 354.

its worst in Augustine's doctrine of predestination which is nothing more than mere fatalism. And when the anti-Pelagians professed to honour the Church's doctrine of baptism, a laver that was professed to take away sins, in fact they dishonoured it by asserting the continuance of concupiscence in those who were baptised. Augustine replied by answering the excerpts he had been sent from Julian's writings; then later he answered him much more fully in his, *Against Julian the Pelagian* (ca. 421). Running to six books, this was certainly Augustine's most systematic point by point refutation of both the claims made by the Pelagians and the accusations they brought against Augustine's teaching. Although Augustine did not advance any argument for the doctrine of original sin that he had not already made in earlier writings, it is worth noting that he reduced Julian's objections to five—all of them directed at the Bishop's major premise – that infants inherit original sin through the act of procreation. Augustine summarised the five contentions as: making the devil the creator of infants, condemning marriage, denying that all sins are remitted in baptism, attributing the guilt of sin to God, and creating despair of ever achieving perfection in this life.¹⁷ In the many pages of close argument that Augustine directed at Julian, he showed himself to be, as in all his conflicts with Manicheans, Donatists and Pelagians, the theologian of grace. In every argument that he made against Coelestius, Pelagius and Julian, Augustine showed his fear that, ultimately, the Pelagian system threatened the priority and indispensability of the merits of Christ and salvation by grace.

Before drawing a conclusion on the course and substance of the Augustinian/Pelagian controversy, it is necessary to look a little more closely at Augustine's exegesis of Romans 5:12. There are no significant variant readings in the Greek text and it translates: 'Therefore as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death passed to all because all sinned'. Augustine read from a Latin text and many of these, including the *Vetus Latina* and the *Vulgate*, have, *in quo omnes peccaverunt*—'in whom all sinned'. It certainly appears that Augustine did not check the Greek text, else he would have surely seen that the Latin *in quo* is not the equivalent of the Greek *eph ho*.¹⁸ Augustine then interpreted this to mean that all human nature was present in totality in Adam, his act of transgression corrupted human nature and that corruption is transmitted to his descendants. Historically those theologians who have followed Augustine's exegesis have tried to express the link between Adam and his descendants in three ways; the physical, the organic and the juridical. The physical explanation means that all men and women are born spiritually corrupt by the law of human generation and in that condition they sin. Certainly

¹⁷ See 'Julian of Eclanum', *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopaedia* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans 1999), 478, 479.

¹⁸ For a good summary of attempted solutions to Romans 5:12, see C E B Cranfield, 'On Some of the Problems in the Interpretation of Romans 5:12', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969), 324-341.

Augustine meant more than that by his exposition of the text. The organic theory says that the race was seminally *in Adam* and when he sinned the whole race sinned in him. The juridical interpretation maintains that Adam was the representative of mankind, he acted as their federal head in a covenant relationship, and when he fell, all mankind fell through him into death, guilt and depravity. During the years he was embroiled in the Pelagian dispute, Augustine seems to argue sometimes for the organic theory and sometimes for the juridical theory—and often he holds the two views together.

By the time he came to write his *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* (421), he seems to have finally come down in favour of the organic explanation. He accuses his opponents of misunderstanding Romans 5:12, talking only about death as the consequence of Adam's sin and failing to explain the words, 'wherein all have sinned'. He then presents them with three possible interpretations; either all sinned in Adam, or all sinned in the sin itself or all sinned in the death. Augustine is sure that only one conclusion is satisfactory: 'It remains that all men are understood to have sinned in that first 'man', because in him all men were when he sinned; whence sin is derived by being born, and is not remitted, save by being born again'. He supported his textual argument by quoting Hilary of Poitiers, though the work in question was written by Ambrosiaster. 'The sainted Hilary says "wherein", that is, in Adam, "all have sinned...It is manifest that all have sinned in Adam, as it were in the mass; for he himself was corrupted by sin, and all whom he begot were born under sin."' ¹⁹

This reference to Hilary underlines Augustine's conviction that his interpretation of Romans 5:12 was not an innovation but represented what the Church had always taught.²⁰ When Julian of Eclanum accused Augustine of a novel interpretation, he responded by saying it was the interpretation of the ancient Fathers. Nor was it peculiar to the Church in the West for Christians in the East held the same view and Chrysostom is quoted as an example.²¹ Augustine protests further that it is the doctrine of the Catholic Church which he had first learned when he became a Christian.

Augustine built a profound theory on a rendering of the Latin text that is philologically inadmissible. That something like a doctrine of original sin is presupposed in Romans 5:12-21 can hardly be doubted. There is a bond of solidarity between Adam and a sinful humanity. That Paul argues an antithetical

¹⁹ *Anti-Pelagian Works, Vol 3, 335,336.*

²⁰ Augustine referred to his interpretation of Romans 5:12 as being 'acceptable to the hearts and consciences of all faithful catholics' and which 'these new-fangled heretics' (i.e., the Pelagians), do their utmost to make obscure by 'dark and tortuous glosses', *Anti-Pelagian Works, Vol 2, 143.*

²¹ The eminent Patristic scholar, J N D Kelly, refutes the suggestion that only the Latin Fathers proposed a doctrine of original sin. Following a very thorough survey on how the Greek Fathers understood original sin, he concludes: 'Though falling short of Augustinianism, there was here the outline of a real theory of original sin', *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A & C Black, 1968), 351.

parallel between Adam and redemption in Christ seems plain enough. Sinful humanity, bereft of eternal life through its relationship with Adam, is given the gift of life eternal through the redeeming work of Christ. So far Augustine is following Paul. What Paul does not say, however, is *how* the sinfulness of Adam and that of human kind is linked. Augustine proposed an answer based on a faulty text—and built on that foundation his whole edifice of seminally transmitted corruption, imputed guilt and, ultimately, predestination.

CONCLUSION

It is clear enough that Pelagius and his followers were convinced that Augustine's system of inherited evil and predestination led either to despair or to an antinomian disregard for the moral law. Nor can it be doubted that the Pelagians earnestly desired a moral reformation in the Church and were convinced that Augustine's gloomy analysis of human nature, even regenerate human nature, was not likely to inspire an evangelical crusade for holy living. And they certainly had good reason to protest that Augustine read into Romans 5:12 a doctrine of procreated genetic sinfulness that goes beyond what Paul asserted. Likewise they had good exegetical reasons for objecting to the Augustinian doctrine of imputed guilt with its corollary implication that all unbaptised infants fall under the wrath and condemnation of God.

But in rejecting the darker side of Augustine's metaphysics, the Pelagians missed something vital. When the writings of Coelestius, Pelagius and Julian are read with as much sympathy as possible, they leave us with a growing uneasiness. Their pages lack the New Testament emphasis on 'the mystery of iniquity', 'the sin which so easily entangles us', 'dead in trespasses and sins', 'the sin of the world', and much, much more that constitutes the biblical terminology of universal sin and its consequences. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that their version of the Christian faith is essentially a system of morals rather than a gospel of redemption. Their arguments lack the distinctive notes of New Testament Christianity: faith, repentance, regeneration, forgiveness, the indwelling of the Spirit. And we can hardly dismiss Augustine's charge that Pelagianism was not, in essence, a gospel of grace for sinners who are otherwise dead in sin. Their optimism about the human condition, the claims for the possibility of living without sin and the prominence given to the autonomy of human volition bespeak a gospel of human achievement rather than a gospel of grace. If Augustine went beyond Scripture in his assertions about propagated evil, imputed guilt, the damnation of unbaptised infants and absolute predestination (and he undoubtedly did), the Pelagians did not go far enough in establishing a gospel of salvation for lost sinners through the only merits and grace of Jesus Christ our Saviour. If Augustine's exegesis read more into the biblical text than can be soundly supported, then the Pelagian exegesis did not pay enough attention to the biblical text. Since we cannot go all the way with Augustine's interpretation, then what is needed is an explanation of the Fall that

does justice to Scripture, to the universal fact of sin, to the pervasiveness of evil in human experience and history, and to the acknowledgement of the ever-present threat of what Paul calls 'the mind of the flesh' even to the regenerate.